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[The Arizona Republic](#)

It's been a month since I spoke to Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., about suicides among military veterans, and I'm just getting around to writing something.

That's embarrassing.

It's just that Senate Bill 1070, immigration, border security and the elections have dominated the news so much that even a column about the people who risk their necks so the rest of us can argue was bound to get lost in the noise.

It still is. I know it. Mitchell knows it.

In his upcoming re-election campaign, he'll probably have to deal with an opponent wondering why he hasn't spent all of his time working on - you guessed it - immigration.

The fact is a U.S. representative without a lot of seniority can't do much about high-profile issues. But he or she can have an impact on less media-driven concerns.

For Mitchell, it's been vets.

As chairman of the U.S. House Veterans' Affairs Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, he has worked on a new GI Bill and has tried to get the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide more mental-health assistance for those who return from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Most recently, he has been trying to get the VA to re-air public-service announcements about its suicide hotline and prevention programs.

During an earlier public-service program, the VA reported 7,000 "rescues" nationwide of potentially suicidal vets.

"In Arizona alone, the VA said that there was a 234 percent increase in the calls to the hotline within 30 days of the media outreach," Mitchell said. "We must keep in touch with our returning vets. We have to educate families about the problems that could develop once a loved one returns. One of the things that hopefully comes out of this type of program is that we destigmatize mental illness. These problems are happening to heroes. These aren't weak people. But after they come back from deployments, we are losing too many to suicide."

There also is a suicide problem in the active military. The Pentagon reported that in June, for instance, there were 32 confirmed or suspected suicides among active-duty soldiers.

"A lot of us don't have to think about the war at all," Mitchell said. "We don't have anyone in the military. It's an all-volunteer force. But this is an obligation that we have to these wonderful people who are doing so much for the rest of us. We have to take care of them."

Because the military is a volunteer force, the government isn't too keen on making a big deal about this issue. Pointing out that there is a suicide problem for returning vets isn't the best recruiting tool.

"This is new territory," Mitchell told me. "Many of these people - and they really are wonderful - have been on two, three, four deployments. We really ask a lot of them. So if there are any difficulties afterwards, we need to be on top of that. We have to make sure they know there are resources available to them. We have to let their families know."

That's difficult to do when surrounded by so much political noise.

"None of this should be partisan," Mitchell said. "Not immigration. Not the wars. Not the economy. It shouldn't be Republican or Democrat. Probably the biggest disappointment I've had about Congress is how partisan it is. That isn't my style. Most of my career was in city government, nonpartisan, working to do the best you can for the people you represented. Now everybody is trying to one-up everybody."

It's a freedom that politicians have, that all of us have, thanks to the veterans whose needs and problems rarely make the news.